



TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 278

S.B. No. 278 (RAISED) AN ACT REQUIRING MULTICHANNEL VIDEO PROGRAMMING DISTRIBUTORS TO PAY A COMMUNITY ACCESS PROGRAMMING FEE.

At the dawn of the cable industry, companies gave channels to local communities so that they could pursue lucrative niche content channels leaving local content to stations owned and run by local people. West Hartford Community Television was founded in 1979 and our very first program was a debate between candidates for the Board of Education.

Over the past 43 years, we have helped connect residents with local information, encourage civic engagement, promote community dialogue and allowed elected officials and community members to communicate easily through coverage of municipal meetings.

We are grouped together in franchises. The Hartford franchise: Hartford, West Hartford, East Hartford, Windsor, Bloomfield and Simsbury. Each town has a non-profit that manages the cable channels for their town. This allows us to provide true local programming. For example, during the height of the pandemic, we carried every government meeting (including 30 commissions /special committee meetings) live on television and YouTube.

In 2007, AT&T entered with IPTV protocol system and the laws were updated to incorporate video providers. The new regulatory structure referred to at the time as “cable-lite” is one that relies on a competitive marketplace to succeed. The timing of the passage of PA-07-253 placed the Hartford franchise stations at a disadvantage because it granted all certificate holders a franchise with no term limits or periodic review. We were slated to begin a docketed process to renew our ten year franchise agreement and instead our rate was frozen only to be adjusted annually by the CPI. We typically would have received a capital block grant for equipment and that was converted into the PEGPETIA fund. The PEGPETIA fund has not been a consistent funding source as these funds were diverted to the Connecticut general fund despite assurances that the language was narrow so that this could not happen. In fact, in PURA Docket that the State of Connecticut provided tax offsets to the cable companies in an attempt to divert these funds.

We now find ourselves again at a moment in time when the laws must be modernized this time to support the important work we do. The state as the franchising authority has the responsibility to ensure there is an appropriate level of funding to provide meaningful community access.

PA-07-253 was designed so that the subscriber would always pay the PEG fee no matter which service they choose to therefore ensure a consistent level of funding. However, this is not the case for West Hartford Community Interactive.

As evidenced by the chart below, our Q4 total cable revenue is \$28,110.46. The cable provider funding continues on a downward trend. Our 2021 total is \$15,932.01 less than the prior year.

We also note that our current cable provider funding is \$56,311.46 less than it was in 2001. With the exception of 2014 when AT&T and Comcast were the predominant video providers in a competitive environment, our funding has steadily declined. Our 2021 cable provider line total is \$15,932.01 less than in 2020.

\$ FY RECEIVED	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Comcast Total	\$148,337.77	\$143,676.59	\$140,634.60	\$138,005.97	\$133,620.54	\$135,153.57	\$138,663.65	\$139,797.92	\$138,190.26	\$134,529.77	\$126,665.15	\$113,373.89	\$26,373.60
Q4 Prior Year	\$37,211.14	\$36,086.04	\$35,028.00	\$35,438.97	\$33,651.12	\$33,144.05	\$34,496.29	\$34,742.65	\$34,611.27	\$33,772.95	\$32,542.85	\$29,498.26	\$26,373.60
Q1	\$37,776.66	\$36,290.15	\$34,607.31	\$33,445.32	\$33,322.64	\$33,613.97	\$34,675.18	\$34,554.12	\$34,995.91	\$33,417.23	\$31,797.35	\$28,440.02	
Q2	\$37,263.93	\$35,902.21	\$36,111.99	\$35,177.89	\$33,672.28	\$34,102.27	\$34,907.76	\$35,712.25	\$34,517.18	\$34,265.66	\$31,985.46	\$28,313.38	
Q3	\$36,086.04	\$35,398.19	\$34,887.30	\$33,943.79	\$32,974.50	\$34,293.28	\$34,584.42	\$34,788.90	\$34,065.90	\$33,073.93	\$30,339.49	\$27,122.23	
Frontier Total						\$26,347.33	\$20,876.59	\$13,208.79	\$16,892.94	\$14,478.10	\$10,648.40	\$8,007.65	\$1,736.86
Q4 Prior Year						\$7,137.52	\$5,692.93	\$4,531.82	\$3,938.26	\$3,973.90	\$3,031.70	\$2,198.00	\$1,736.86
Q1						\$6,589.60	\$5,376.25	\$4,415.83	\$4,371.75	\$3,733.10	\$2,737.00	\$2,034.20	
Q2						\$6,589.60	\$5,080.23	\$4,261.14	\$4,362.99	\$3,514.70	\$2,539.60	\$1,908.90	
Q3						\$6,030.61	\$4,727.18	\$4,049.48	\$4,219.94	\$3,256.40	\$2,340.10	\$1,866.55	
AT&T Total	\$6,407.61	\$14,309.29	\$20,964.33	\$25,128.81	\$30,139.50								
Q4 Prior Year	\$1,408.66	\$2,552.21	\$4,636.96	\$5,526.42	\$7,028.04								
Q1	\$1,216.66	\$3,017.48	\$5,194.25	\$6,123.21	\$7,565.45								
Q2	\$1,614.79	\$3,774.89	\$5,670.16	\$6,369.20	\$7,769.63								
Q3	\$2,167.50	\$4,964.71	\$5,462.96	\$7,109.98	\$7,776.38								
Total	\$154,745.38	\$157,985.88	\$161,598.93	\$163,134.78	\$163,760.04	\$161,500.90	\$159,540.24	\$153,006.71	\$155,083.20	\$149,007.87	\$137,313.55	\$121,381.54	\$28,110.46
Difference from Prior Year													
		-\$3,240.50	-\$3,613.05	\$1,535.85	\$625.26	-\$2,259.14	-\$1,960.66	-\$6,533.53	\$2,076.49	-\$6,075.33	-\$11,694.32	-\$15,932.01	
Difference in 10 Years													
											-\$17,431.83	-\$33,363.84	
2008 Total	\$177,693.00										-\$40,379.45	-\$56,311.46	
2001 Total	\$125,314.60											-\$3,933.06	

This proposed bill will stabilize the funding for public, educational and governmental channels by ensuring that all subscribers in the regulatory system pay equally for the support of the channels which are resource open for all community members to use.

West Hartford Community Television d/b/a West Hartford Community Interactive supports this bill. There are other ways to achieve a stabilization of funding. In Massachusetts, a percentage of the tax on streaming services is being considered. Connecticut already collects the tax on streaming services and that is in the general fund. In Vermont, the legislature is considering an allocation from the general fund to uphold community media in the state. Connecticut must do something now before the bottom falls out of our funding and this solution is a logical way to solve the problem of providing adequate funding.

We are at the dawn of a new era. How will community (PEG) television, a federally mandated service, be funded in the future. This minor tweak in existing law will help solve something the original framers never considered – that new technology would allow subscribers to exist outside the regulatory structure. All video providers need to be within the regulatory framework for our system to provide adequate funding and to provide a level playing field for the providers.

The fact is that competitive video service providers will tell you we are obsolete. Their argument is not true. They have lobbied at every turn against all attempts to keep us relevant. They are on the record against - allowing our program listings on the electronic programming guide, HD channels (one HD channel in Connecticut at Community Voice Channel provided in lieu of legislation) periodic review.

We are now in a time when we access to information in its purest form - gavel to gavel coverage of a town meeting - is critical to the future of our democracy. People can go to the source and see for themselves what the intent of the Town Council is on the issues that directly affect them on a local level. This service we provide must be protected and funded into the future.

Respectfully Submitted,

Jennifer Evans

West Hartford Community Interactive

WHCI PANDEMIC RESPONSE

During times of emergency including the October Storm and now the COVID-19 Pandemic, we have dedicated ourselves to providing emergency information to our residents and ensuring that people stay connected. In fact, the Town of West Hartford was able to comply with the Governor's Executive Order and meet and do business in compliance with

open meeting laws because we carried every committee meeting, Town Council Meeting and School Board Meeting held until people could meet in person. We continue to do this work for all committees that are now meeting virtually due to Omicron. As previously mentioned, it was a PPP loan combined with a PEGPETIA grant, that allowed us to dramatically scale up our programming to meet the moment to serve the media needs of our community, including:

- Increased Government Meeting Coverage from four meetings a month to 32 meetings a month.
- Telecast over 50,000 hours of programming across three PEG channels
- Produced 2,918 original programs
- Produced educational videos with leaders, school nurses and health professionals about how to wash your hands, wear PPE and vote in the pandemic.
- Town Departments depended on us to create videos and live events including a Virtual Senior Concert Series live to the channel versions on community celebrations - including Memorial Day, MLK Jr, Day, and Community Conversations.
- Online engagement continues to grow...2,601 subscribers.

We know from first hand experience how an additional \$40,000 in operating funds from grants from the Town Clerk, State of CT CARES and PPP dramatically increased our capacity and was used 100% for payroll to bring on local people and students. These are local jobs that are benefiting the local public interest. These funding options combined with PEGPETIA which provided equipment and capacity for creative problem solving. We had a glimpse of the impact with can have when we have equipment and funding.

This impact was mirrored by community stations across the nation and the value of community media during the pandemic is qualified in a study by American University that was released in 2020.

The report “PEG Access Media: Local Communication Hubs in a Pandemic” is based on surveys and interviews of operations in 26 states earlier this Spring and does a good job capturing how our sector has stepped up to meet the emergency.

https://wcm.memberclicks.net/assets/docs/Resources/COVID19/CMSI_Report_FINAL_FINAL.pdf

During the October Storm, we were embedded in the Emergency Operations Center for daily briefings and providing critical emergency information. We are part of the Town’s Emergency Preparedness Plan and are called upon to assist with emergency messaging. In 2012, our station was named the Best of PEG Access by the Alliance for Community Media. We are capable of great work.

In November 2021, we had two programs recognized with Noreasters Awards - "RiseUP with Dawn Ennis" in the Diversity Empowerment category and "West Hartford Votes 2020: What You Need to Know about Absentee Ballots and Voting In Person" in the Instructional and Training Category. This video ran on the channels and had over one thousand views on demand. The 2020 election had record turn out. We also produced an updated video in 2021 and partnered with the League of Women Voters of Greater Hartford to present candidate debates and profiles. On Election Day, we were live with results in 2021 and 2022.

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